

V. BORNEO

**Niah 'Three Colour Ware' and
Related Prehistoric Pottery from Borneo**

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THOUGH previous publications have mentioned the pottery found in the Great Cave at Niah (Harrisson 1957: 164-65; Harrisson 1959 *a*: 6) and a few vessels have been illustrated (Harrisson 1957: pl. O *b*, and Harrisson 1958: fig. 3), no general or specific report on it has yet been published. This paper presents a general description of the Niah 'Three Colour Ware', the pottery associated with it in the Great Cave at Niah, and very briefly the related pottery known from other sites in Borneo. Specific descriptions of the Niah pottery and the pottery from the other sites will appear in the *Sarawak Museum Journal* when the detailed analyses have been completed.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Cave at Niah has been described several times (Harrisson 1957; Solheim 1960). The primary excavation area is at one corner of the cave, by the side wall, extending from the front, back into the cave about 100 metres. To the front of this area the excavation has come across refuse mainly from a living site, while stretching back into the cave is an extensive cemetery.

Pottery has been found scattered about the whole excavation area, but it is primarily associated with the cemetery. To the front, the pottery is mostly found in the top twelve inches with a much smaller number of sherds below that and none below twenty-four inches. The majority of the burials have been left *in situ* after uncovering, for later final excavation, so the depth to which pottery, and burials, extends in the cemetery is not yet known.

In the cemetery, large sherds or major portions of broken vessels were sometimes placed in specific locations on the burials (Harrisson 1957: pl. O *b*). In some cases whole pots were associated with burials (Pl. I). Large jars were used for secondary burial, mostly for children. Several such jars were found *in situ*, mostly collapsed, but a few intact; they often had a second vessel of a different type as a covering lid.

Large burial jars, large decorated vessels and other special funerary ware was probably made on the spot, in the caves. There is a source of clay in Gan Kira, a side mouth, with indications of prehistoric mining.

Pottery from several nearby caves and side mouths of the Great Cave, to be reached through darkness, show definite relationship to that of the Great Cave. Particulars for this pottery have not yet been worked out. It is likely that the pottery of the other caves is later and that it indicates a general deterioration of pottery manufacture with a larger percentage of plain pottery and very little of the incised and painted pottery.

Two carbon samples associated with this pottery have been dated (Harrison 1959 *b*: 563). From a tree-trunk coffin in the cemetery comes a date of $2,460 \pm 70$ B.P. (Groningen 1958). A charcoal sample from subsurface in the front area of the cave gave a date of $2,455 \pm 65$ B.P. (Groningen 1958).

NIAH POTTERY

The pottery from the Great Cave has for preliminary purposes been sub-divided into four general groups: plain, paddle decorated, polished, and painted and incised. The approximate statistics for these groups by number are: plain 63%, paddle decorated 29%, polished 5%, painted and incised 3%. When type descriptions appear these will be divided into five types: Niah-Plain; Niah-Impressed: Carved Paddle; Niah-Impressed: Bound Paddle; Niah-Polished, and Niah-Painted and Incised. Other possible types are Niah-Incised, and Niah-Incised and Impressed: simple tool. In reference to the statistics presented above it must be borne in mind that a considerable number of sherds preliminarily classified as 'plain' are, in fact, undecorated parts of decorated vessels. It is hoped in the final analysis to present the statistics in terms of vessel count rather than by number or weight of sherds.

The description of the Niah pottery which follows deals first with the surface treatment of the several types and then with their forms.

Surface Treatment

Detailed examination of the plain pottery has not yet been made.

Niah-Impressed: Carved Paddle. The carved paddle decoration is produced by the beating of the clay wall of a vessel with a wooden stick or paddle into the surface of which has been cut a design. In this beating a negative image of the design on the paddle is transferred or impressed to the surface of the vessel.

The most common pattern of the carved paddle impressed pottery is a crossed pattern, made up of a series of squares or rectangles, or rarely, diamonds (Pl. I and II *a*; all plates from Sarawak Museum photographs). The range of size of the squares is from 2.5 mm. to 10 mm. On a few vessels there is a ribbed pattern on the rim and a crossed pattern on the body (Pl. II *b*).

There is a variety of other carved paddle decoration, but it is rare. Some of these sherds are similar to what is known from other Borneo sites and may have been imported to Niah.

Niah-Impressed: Bound Paddle. The bound paddle decoration is produced by the beating of the plastic clay of a vessel with a paddle bound or wrapped with cord or basketry. At Niah there are two varieties, cord-marked or basketry-marked. In both cases the negative image of the cord or basket weave extending above the surface of the paddle is impressed into the clay.

The cord-marked variety is the most common of the bound paddle decoration (Pl. III *a*). This was made with light string or cord wound tightly or loosely, with strands close together or far apart. The diameter of the string or cord used varies from 1 mm. to 2.5 mm.

The basketry-marked variety is less common. There are several different types of basketry weave indicated. Some of them are regular and closely woven while some are coarse or loosely woven (Pl. III *b*). There are five or six different types of weave present.

A small number of vessels were decorated with a combination of two patterns.

Niah-Polished. Detailed examination of the polished vessels has just been started, so little can be said. Several of the polished vessels had a red slip. These vessels have been found associated only with burials.

Niah-Incised and Painted. This is the pottery which has been called Niah 'Three Coloured Ware'. The painting is in black and red or red alone on a tan base giving two or three colours. Painted pattern elements are inclosed in incised lines. The incised decoration, which covers a large portion of the surface of the vessel, has the pattern accentuated by the painting or by areas with incised dashes, circles, or impressed dots (punctuations) or circles (Pl. IV *a* and *b* and Frontispiece).

The elements of incised decoration are meanders, scrolls, and triangles—both opened and closed—and in one case, interlocking arches (Pl. IV *c-h*). These elements may occur singly or combined. Total widths of a complete horizontal band of decoration vary from 2 cm. to over 30 cm., correlated with the size of the vessel. Some of the decoration was roughly executed while other was carried out with great care.

Least common and most spectacular is the incised and painted pottery of unusual and varied form.

Form

The most noticeable generalization which can be made about the form of the Niah pottery as a group is its great diversity. Forms of the paddle-decorated pottery generally suggest utility vessels, but of richly varied type. The plan, polished, and incised and painted vessels were very possibly made specially for ritual purposes. Some of the sherds from paddle decorated pottery have remnants of soot on the outer surface. The approximate number of vessels mentioned refers to pottery from the cemetery.

Niah-Plain. Very little has as yet been done on reconstructing the form of the plain vessels. They tend to run in large and heavy vessels. Flat bases occur.

Niah-Impressed: Carved Paddle. The majority of the vessels with a crossed pattern are small, roughly 15 cm. to 25 cm. in diameter. One of the large vessels has a wide mouth, ovoid body and out-curved rim (Fig. 1 *a*). There are two pear-shaped vessels with a narrow high neck and slightly out-turned rim, one large (about 50-60 cm. tall) and the other small (Pl. I). Other small vessels number about sixty to seventy. They are usually semi-spherical with out-turned rim (Fig. 1 *b*). Less common and of a better quality—often with a polished inner surface—are vessels with shallow rounded bodies and a flaring rim (Fig. 1 *c*). Rims are predominantly plain, though a few have small notches. One somewhat larger vessel has a modelled decoration on the rim in the form of scallops around the edge of the rim (Pl. V *a*). Large vessels number about twenty and include at least ten wide-mouthed (rim diameter about 25 cm.) shallow vessels with rounded bases and two with flat bases.

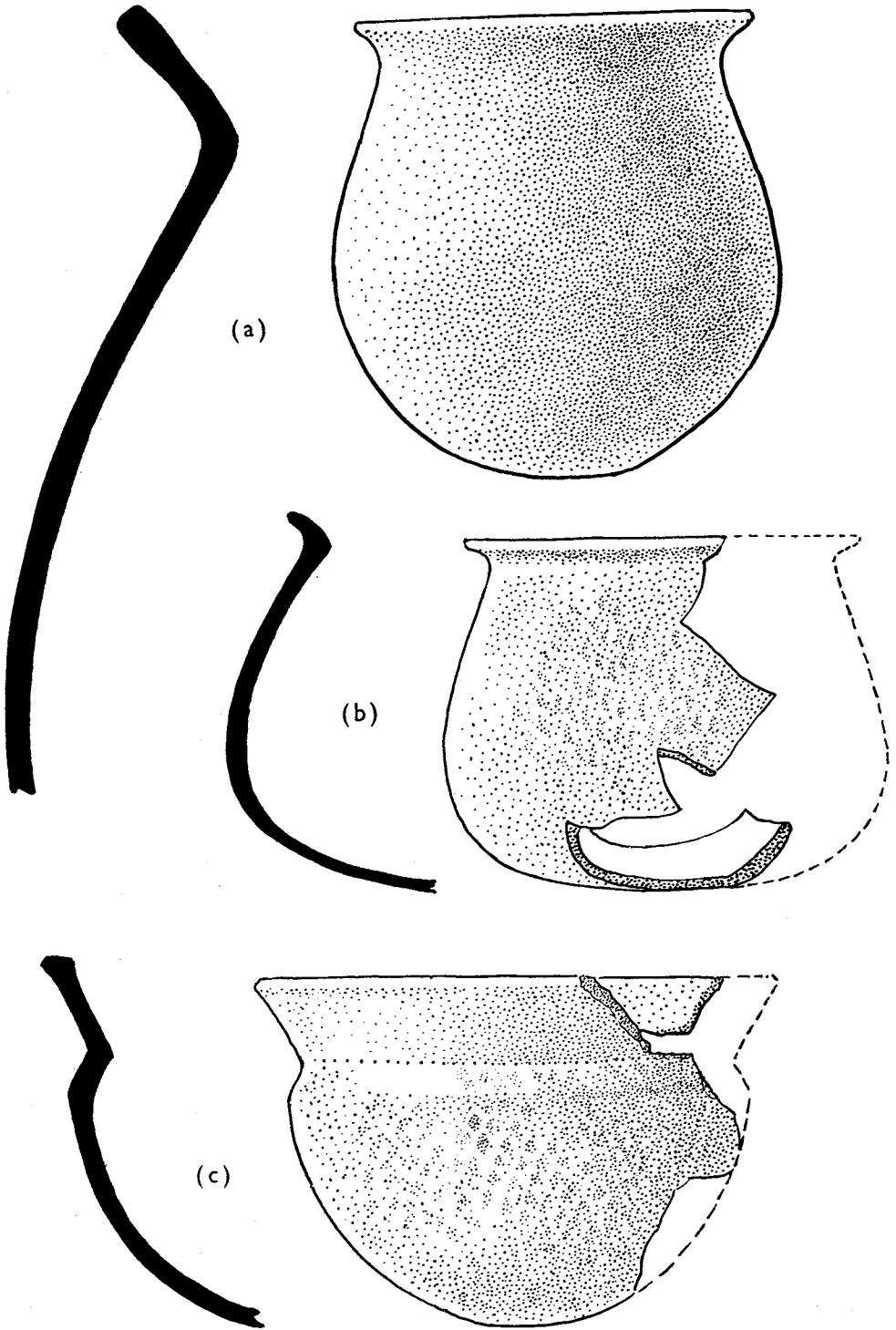


FIG. 1. Niah-Impressed: Carved Paddle. See page 169.

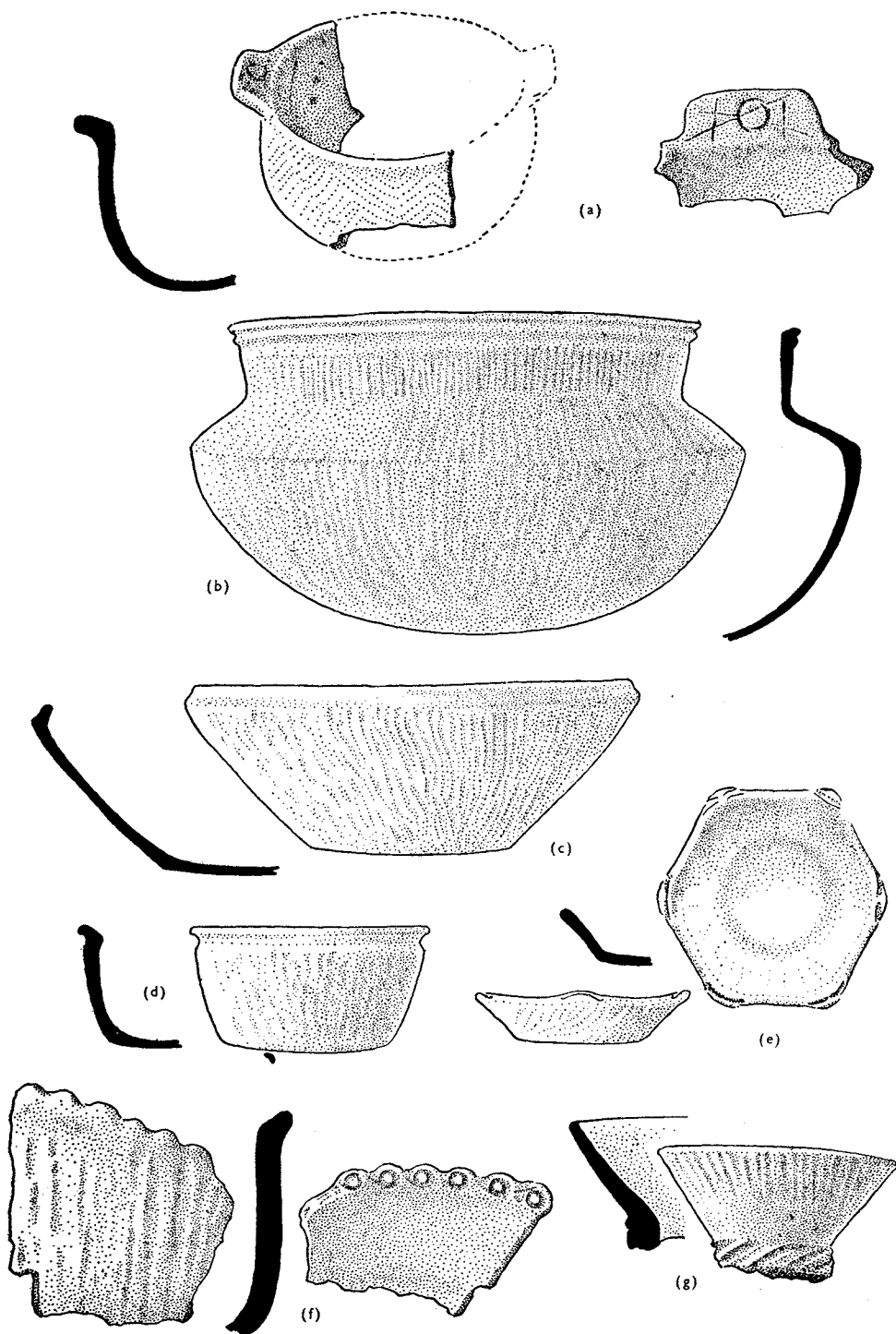


FIG. 2. Niah-Impressed: Bound Paddle. See page 172.

Miscellaneous carved paddle designs occur on about five vessels with small semi-spherical bodies. One of these is a shallow bowl with a straight rim and two handles at the rim (Fig. 2 *a*). The upper surface of the handles has an incised and impressed decoration.

Niah-Impressed: Bound Paddle. This type has greater variety in form and rim type than does the carved paddle pottery. There are about thirty to thirty-five original cord-marked objects represented. There are four or five rather large vessels with a wide mouth, out-curving rim (often complex in profile), and angled body (Fig. 2 *b* and Pl. V *b*). Relative to these, most of the vessels tend to be medium and small sized. Probably the most usual form is a semi-spherical body with out-turned rim. Other forms include: shallow vessels with an almost straight side and a flat or slightly concave base (Fig. 2 *c*); angled jars; small bowls with flat bottoms (Fig. 2 *d*); and hexagonal very shallow bowls with flat bottoms and with incised or impressed decorations at the rim, on the corners (Fig. 2 *e* and Pl. V *c*). Some vessels have a low ring foot, but the most common are probably with a rounded base. Rim forms include in-curved, straight, and out-turned and may be incised or impressed (Fig. 2 *f*). One spout or possible ring foot is cord-marked (Fig. 2 *g*).

About twenty vessels make up the basket-marked variety. Most of them are small with spherical bodies, out-turned, sometimes decorated rims, and rounded bases. One or two larger jars have a spherical body with a straight rim (Pl. V *d*).

Niah-Polished. The outstanding form of the polished type is the double-spouted vessel (Pl. VI *a* and Harrison 1958: fig. 3) of which there are about half a dozen. These are of varying sizes from approximately 30 cm. to 45 cm. in overall height. Other vessels of this type have slightly concave bases or rounded bases with an angle between the side and the base. These angle vessels are in a different proportion to those of the cord-marked variety. Shoulder angles are also common.

Some vessels show what was probably a pattern from a carved or bound paddle, almost completely obliterated by the polishing.

Niah-Incised and Painted. There are four very large conical basins with rounded base, wide mouth, straight rim, and prominent ridge or angled shoulder below the rim (Pl. VI *b* and Frontispiece). There are two vessels of a similar shape but slightly smaller in size. Usually the middle portion of these vessels—from the ridge or shoulder to the curve of the base—are decorated, though on some the decoration extends on to the rim as well.

Two medium-sized jars with out-curved rim (no base known) have a band of decoration under the rim and extending on to it. One small jar has an applied ring foot with one or more holes pierced through it (Fig. 3 *b*). There is one small vessel with out-curved rim which seems to have a decorated lid made to fit (Fig. 3 *a*). There is too little material available to be more definite about other forms but it is interesting to note that every vessel of this type has a variant shape and decoration.

Miscellaneous. A different type of double spouted vessel is represented by two stirrup handles which are decorated with incised lines and impressed circles (Pl. VI *c*). The stirrup, acting as a bridge between the two spouts, must have represented the top of the vessel. No attempt at full reconstruction has yet been made, but it is

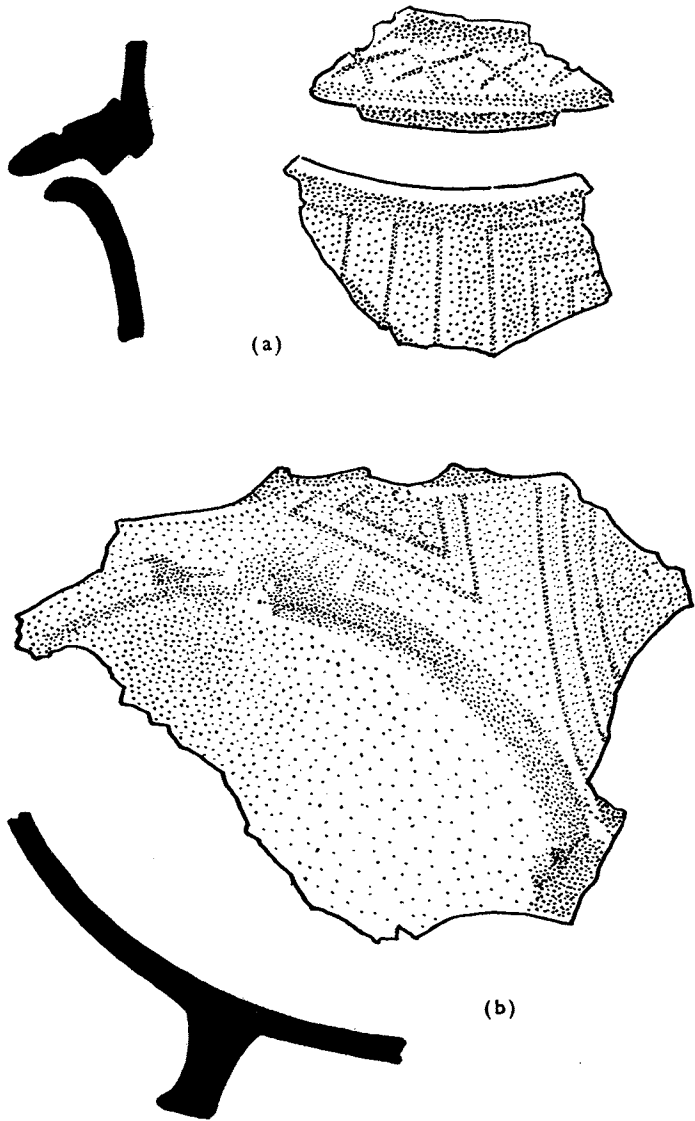


FIG. 3. Niah-Incised and Painted. See opposite page.

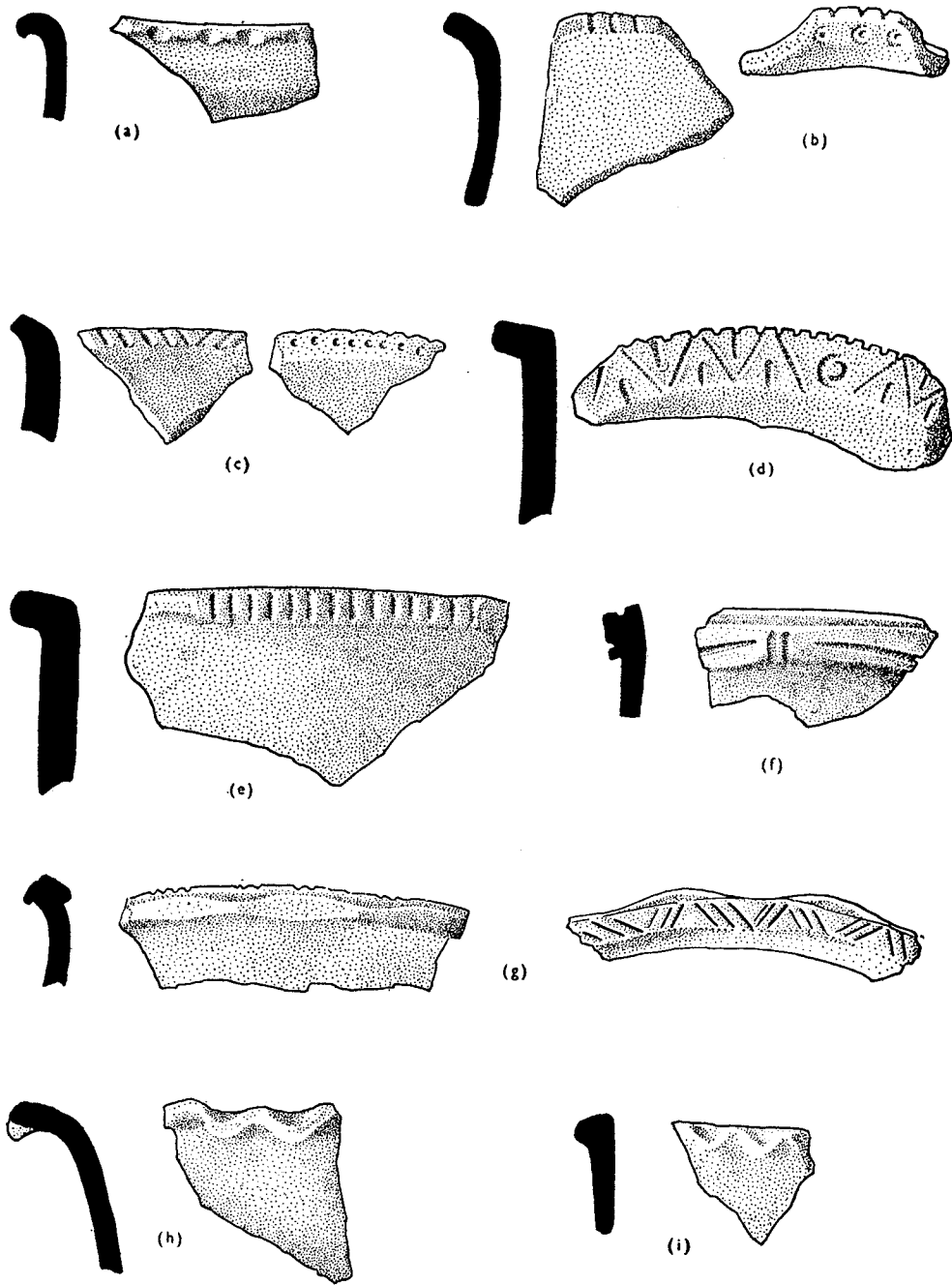


FIG. 4. Rim forms from Gua Sirih. See opposite page.

probable that the bodies of the vessels were either spherical or pear-shaped. These may have been moulded over a water-filled skin bound up at the top, as indicated by clear impressions in the inner surface of the vessels.

NIAH AND OTHER SITES IN BORNEO

Related pottery has been found at Gua Sirih, in the 1st Division of Sarawak, and at Pulau Burong, near Labuan island in North Borneo. The Sirih material is being analysed at the present time, so only a few generalizations can be made. The site at Pulau Burong was discovered by Tom Harrison in May 1960 and only two sherds have been examined. The site was in a tiny cave on the small limestone islet.

The sherds from Pulau Burong are incised and painted. A red slip on the natural tan background accentuates the pattern formed by the incised lines. There is a band of running triangles around the vessel above the shoulder ridge and below it, a possible curvilinear scroll pattern (Pl. VII *a*). The form of the portion of this vessel indicated by the sherds is very similar to the form and size of a portion of one of the polished vessels from Niah.

Gua Sirih is a cave in a limestone hill about thirty-five miles inland from Kuching. The living portion of the cave extends back into the hill about 25 metres. There is considerable variation in the pottery from the front of the cave to the rear. Near the front were found sherds from a number of small vessels decorated with incised triangles, meanders, and impressed circles (Pl. VII *b-e*). There was probably a lime inlay in the incised and impressed lines, bringing the pattern out in white. Most of these vessels had a bright red slip.

There is a great variety in rim form. Many rims have impressed patterns (Fig. 4 *a-d*) and some are also incised (Fig. 4 *b-g*). Several rims have the modelled scallop design (Fig. 4 *e-g*), and some have a modelled wavy lip (Fig. 4 *h-i*).

Two major sub-varieties of basket-marked decoration are present in Gua Sirih. One, called light basket for purposes of classification, is similar to the basket-marked decoration found at the Niah caves (Pl. VIII *e-g*). The other, called heavy basket, is like nothing found at Niah (Pl. VIII *a-c*). Crossed and cord-marked sherds are also common (Pl. VIII *h-i* and *d*).

One small modelled and carved head of some kind of animal was found (Pl. IX).

A number of miscellaneous patterns from a carved paddle are present at Sirih which have not been found at Niah. Two charcoal samples are in the process of being C-14 dated.

INDICATIONS OF DIFFUSION AND CONTACT

There are several indications of contact between the people producing the Niah and the Gua Sirih pottery and people from the delta country near Kuching who made quite a different pottery. Many of the carved paddle patterns found at Gua Sirih and not present at Niah are similar to patterns found at Santubong. Some of the Santubong pottery show influence from the Niah pottery, such as the stirrup handles, with similar incised decorations. This related Santubong material may well be a thousand years later than the Niah material from the Great Cave, which would

mean that the manufacture of pottery similar to the Niah pottery must have lasted for some time, whether at Niah or elsewhere. The rare three or four sherds of the Santubong, varieties of pottery found in the Great Cave are probably later intrusions. The large number of sherds of the Santubong varieties found at Gua Sirih probably means that Sirih overlapped or was to some extent contemporaneous with the Santubong sites.

Two separate sherds from the Great Cave at Niah indicate further outside contacts. One had vertical impressed wavy lines made with a shell. This is similar to decoration on sherds found in the Bau caves (Harrison and Tweedie 1951) near Kuching. The second sherd shows no close relationship to any other known Borneo pottery. It has an impressed band of an intricate floral pattern which must have been made with a pottery stamp. Much simpler impressed designs are found on sherds from the Kota Batu site in Brunei but their relationship to the unique Niah sherd is only in the technique of impressing the design into the clay of the vessel before firing. The style of the Niah pattern is completely different.

Research on the Niah pottery, its related pottery in Borneo, and its relationship to other pottery in Borneo is only just beginning.

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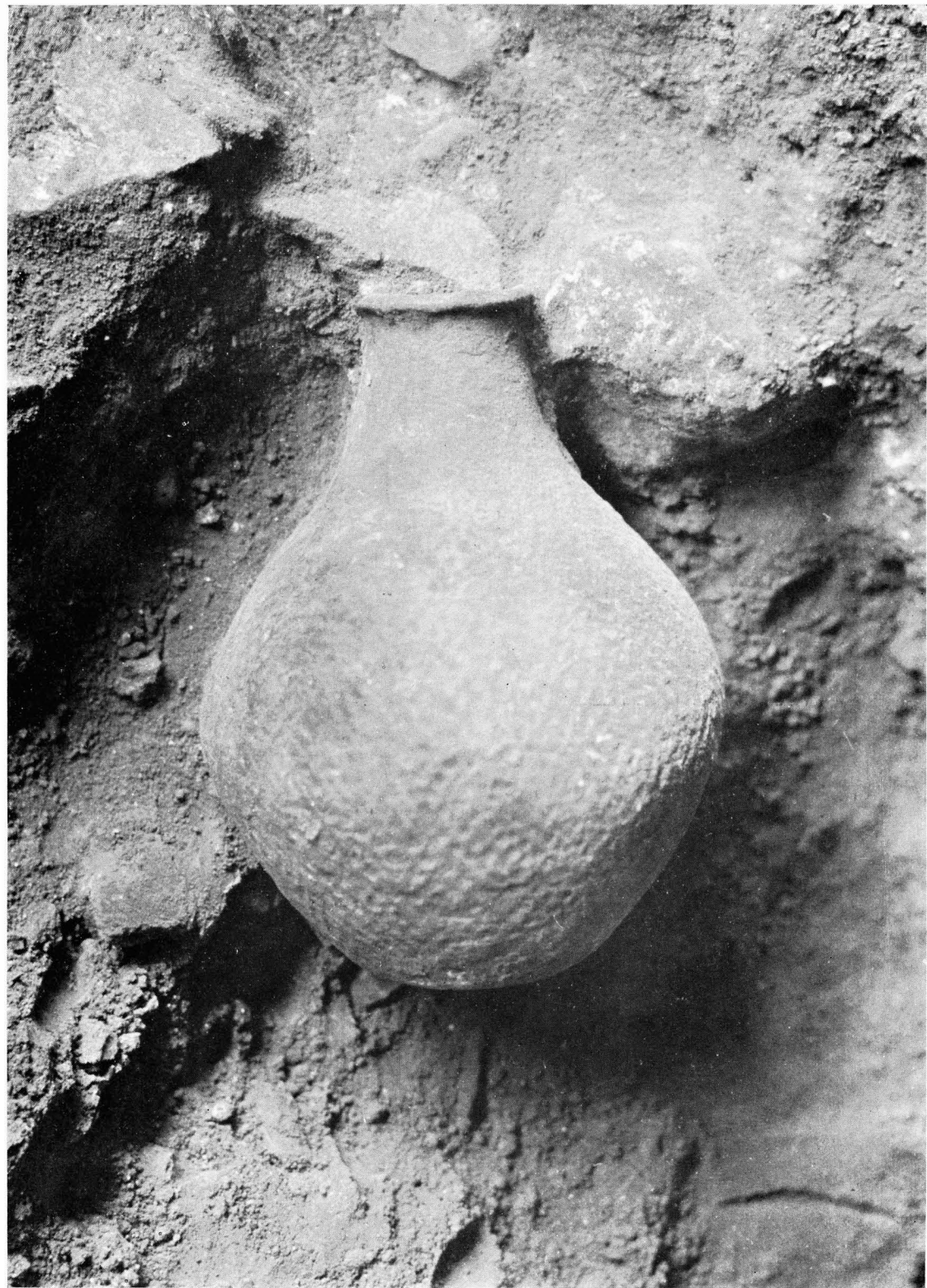
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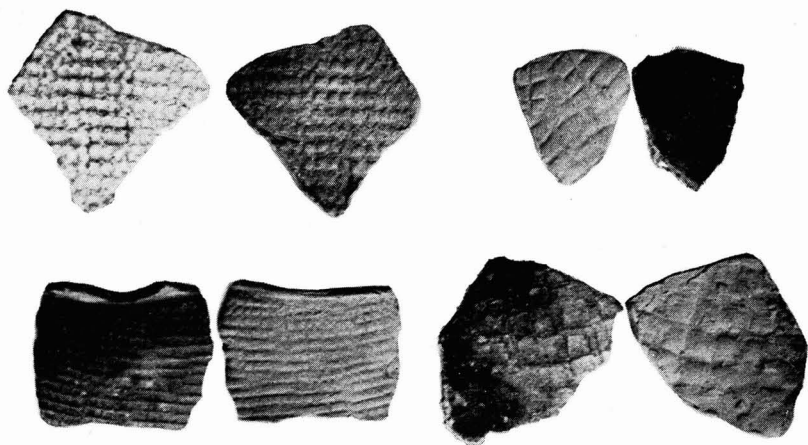
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Complete earthenware pot found in the burial site in the Great Cave at Niah.



a

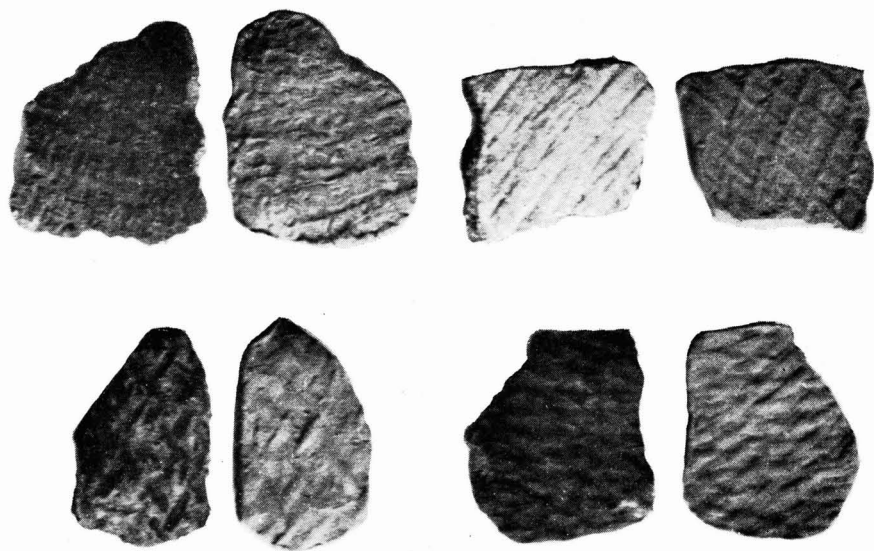


b

Examples of sherds with Niah-Impressed: Carved Paddle Decoration: *a* sherds with crossed pattern and clay impressions of these sherds (to the right except for sherd in upper right hand corner); *b* rim sherd with crossed pattern on the body and ribbed pattern on the rim.

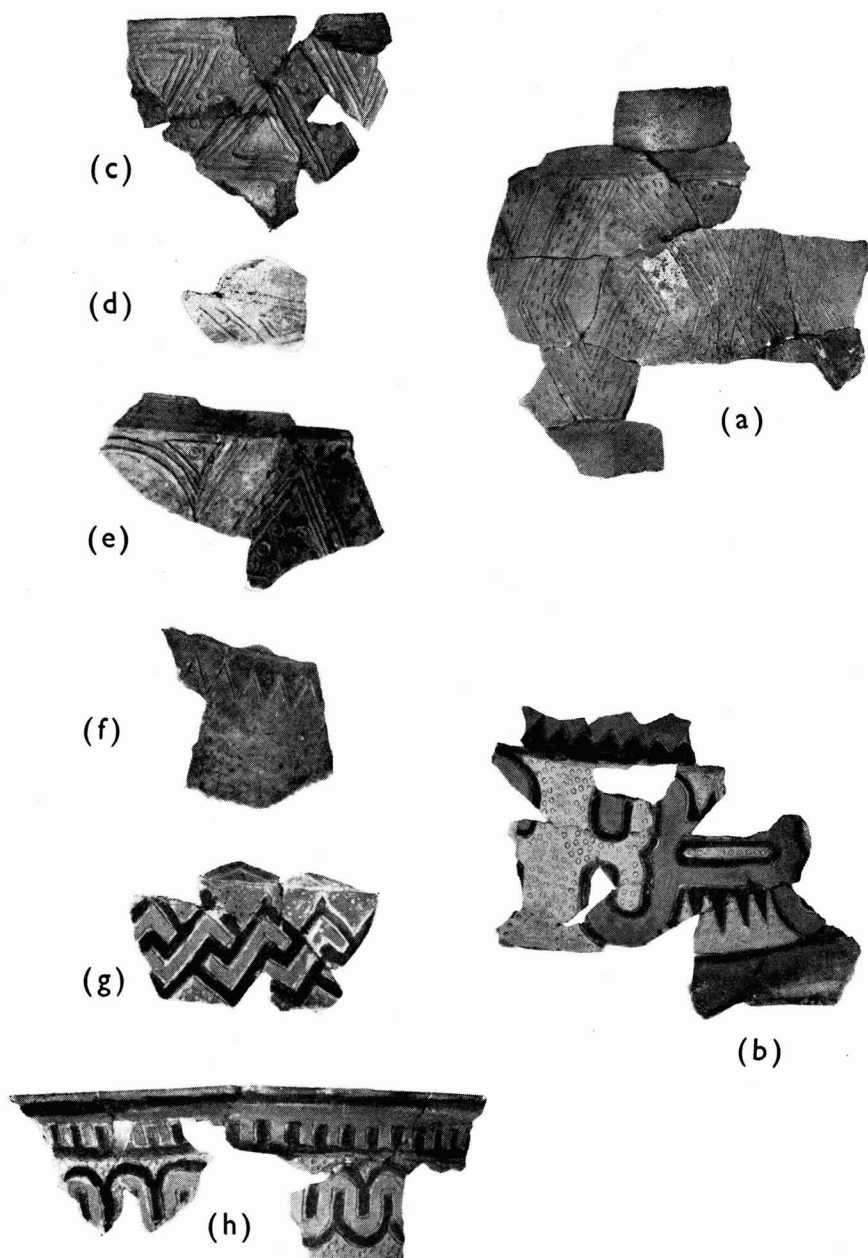


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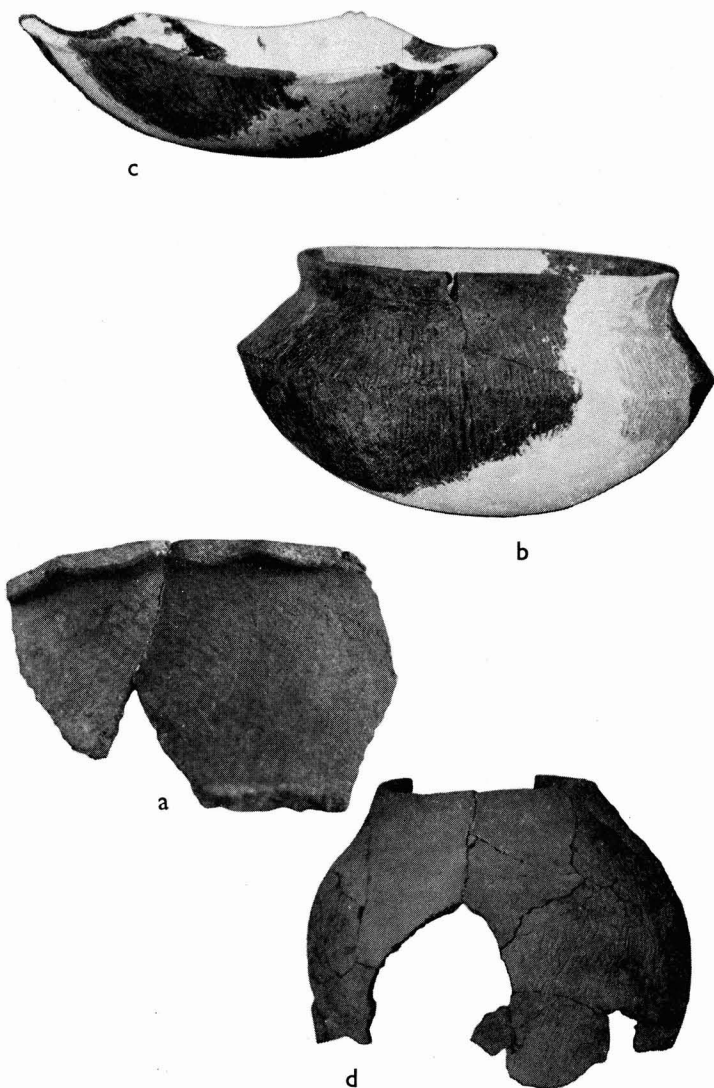


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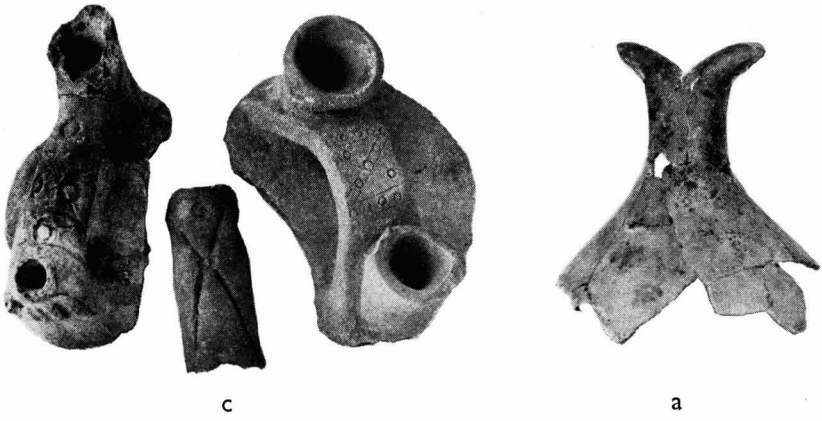
Examples of sherds with Niah-Impressed: Bound-Paddle Decoration: *a* cord-marked sherds and clay impressions; *b* basketry-marked sherds and impressions.



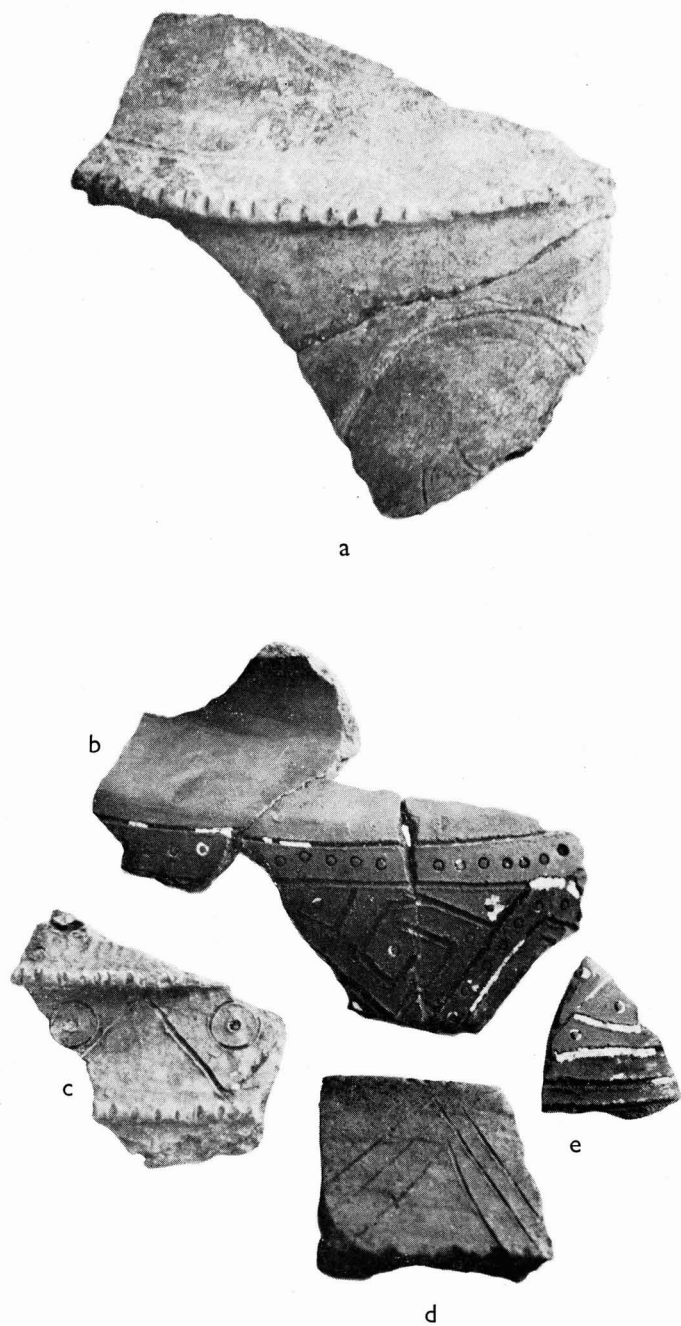
Niah-Incised sherds: *a* portion of a Niah-Incised vessel; *b* Niah-Incised and Painted (a careful examination has not yet been made to determine whether the small circles are incised or impressed); *c-e* Niah-Incised and Impressed: simple tool; *f* Niah-Incised; *g-h* Niah-Incised, Painted, and Impressed: simple tool.



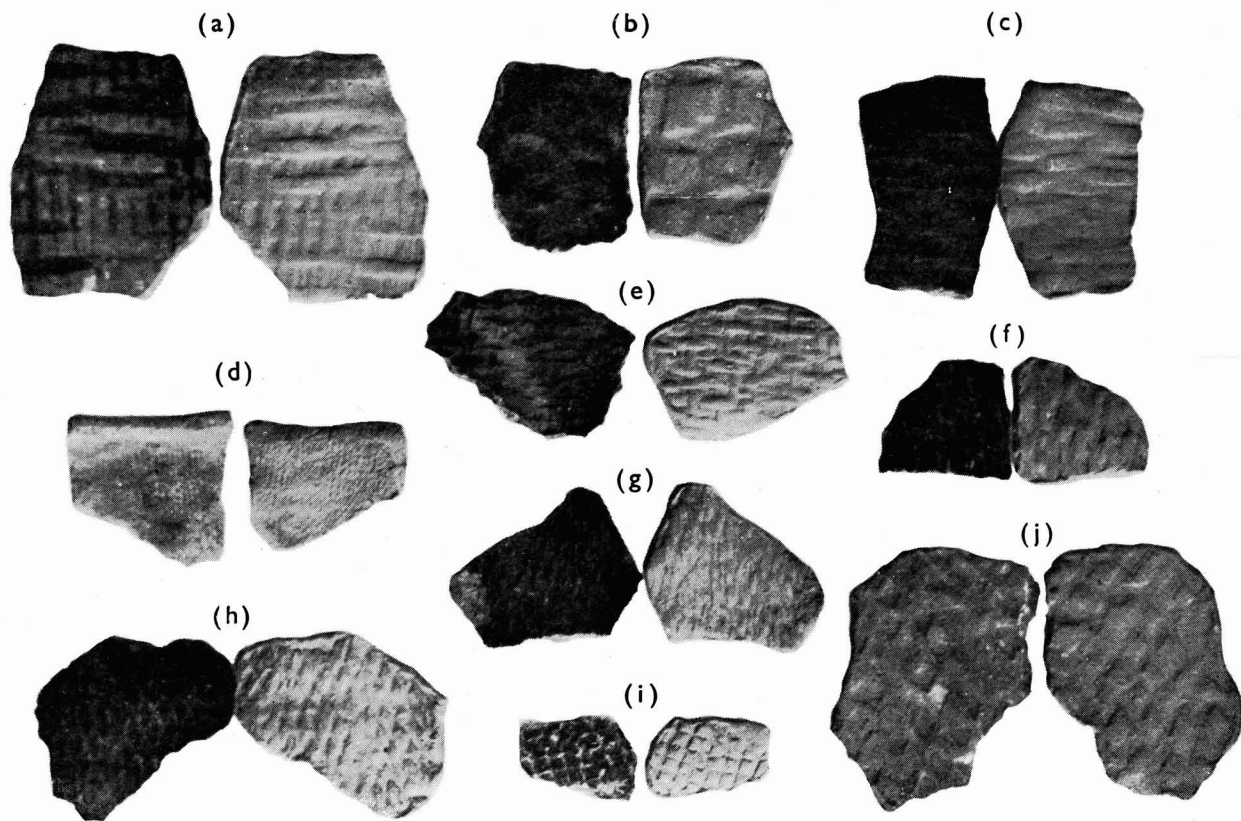
a Niah-Impressed: sherd of Carved-Paddle vessel with scalloped decoration on the lip. *b* Niah-Impressed: Bound Paddle, cord-marked pattern; *c* cord-marked shallow bowl; *d* basket-marked jar with spherical body and straight rim (original height 14 cm.)



a Niah-Polished, double-spouted vessel; *b* Niah-Incised and Painted, large vessel (see also Frontispiece in colour). *c* Incised and impressed stirrup spout.



a. Incised and painted sherd from Pulau Burong, near Labuan, North Borneo.
b-e. Incised and impressed sherds from Gua Sirih, near Kuching, Sarawak.



Earthenware from Gua Sirih, Sarawak.

a-c heavy basket pattern; *d* cord-marked; *e-g* light basket pattern; *h-i* crossed pattern.



Small effigy of animal head found at
Gua Sirih. See page 175.